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Author(s)	ASANTE, Belle
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WOMEN'S CRAFT GUILDS AND THE TRADITIONAL BASKETRY (*GE MOT*) OF HARAR, ETHIOPIA

Belle ASANTE

Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University

ABSTRACT Traditional Harari basketry (*ge mot*) continues to be a highly praised craft within the Harari ethnic group. However, between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, a sharp decline in weaving among the younger generation of women became apparent to outside researchers, NGOs and the Harari alike. Moreover, the production of several *ge mot* styles seems to have been significantly reduced in those waning years of craft production.

By the late 1990s, there was an attempt to preserve the material culture of the Harari people, and also provide a forum for groups of Harari women to gain greater economic self-reliance through craft work. The three women's weavers associations that were established within the old walled city of Harar at that time are still functioning. These fairly recently formed Harari women's craft guilds have yet to be effectively documented, yet their contributions to the preservation of the Harari way of life may be profound.

After an introduction to *ge mot*, its functions, styles and indicators of a decline in production, this paper will highlight some organizational differences, challenges, and successes of the three Harari women weaver's guilds.

Key Words: Harar; Ethiopia; Basketry; Women's craft guilds.

INTRODUCTION

This study attempts to understand the importance of Harari basketry *in the context* of women's activities. Thus, while conducting six months of fieldwork in 2002-2003, I tried to give equal consideration to the craft and the crafts-person, especially because the nature of traditional crafts is intrinsically interwoven with the nature of the culture in which it develops.

Harar is the administrative capital of Harari People National Regional State, which is in the eastern part of Ethiopia, 525 km east of the capital of Addis Ababa. Harar has traditionally been a mercantile city. Today, Harar is an important Ethiopian military, administrative and educational center. There are just over 22,000 members of the Harari ethnic group in all of Ethiopia. According to the latest census (Central Statistical Authority, 1999), Harari people comprise only 7% of the residents of the Regional State of Harar. Nonetheless, not only is the state named after this group, but also Harari, a distinct Ethiopian Semitic language, is the State's official language. The Harari call themselves *ge usu* (people of the city), their language, '*ge sinan*' (language of the city), and their way of life, '*ge ada*' (customs of the city). Ninety-nine percent of Harari are Muslims and consider their city holy (Waldron, 1984). Today, approximately 21,000 people live in the 60 hectares of the old city that is encompassed by

the *Jugol* wall.⁽¹⁾ The old city is divided into five quarters. Within these quarters are smaller neighborhoods called *toiach* that are often named after one of the “fathers of the city” or *awach* (Waldron, 1975). It is the domain of the old walled city of Harar that this study is concerned with.

Several types of basket styles are created and marketed within the multi-ethnic city of Harar. These include baskets in the tradition of *Oromo* and *Amhara* ethnic groups, alongside traditional and contemporary Harari basket styles. Nevertheless, this study focuses particularly on *ge mot* which are those coiled basketry bowls, plates and lidded containers which have traditionally been a part of the ceremonial and everyday life activities of the Harari ethnic group. Customarily, these baskets were hung on the walls of Harari homes and have traditionally held an elevated status in the material culture of this group. Among them are the dowry baskets a Harari bride must bring to her marriage.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Two researchers have published articles or monographs about Harari basketry — a traditional woman’s craft. The first was Elisabeth-Dorothea Hecht (1992, 1994), who carried out fieldwork in 1975. A later article written by Ahmed Zekaria (1999) was based on research in 1993. Hecht noted the rising threat to traditional Harari basketry coming from the competition with imported dishes. Twenty years later, Zekaria warned that there were only about ten professional weavers left in the city and that the knowledge of how to weave the larger baskets was in danger of being lost. This current study has been, in part, an attempt to expand upon the research of Hecht - to see how the tradition was changing, and to assess if there were as critically few weavers left, as Zekaria had suggested.

METHODS

Data were collected through structured and semi-structured interviews with professional weavers and knowledgeable individuals. There was a bias in my sample towards professional weavers (58%). However, the bias was intentional because I needed to get answers of practical importance. Those professional weavers were selected for their technical knowledge about basketry more than for their statistical representativeness. Finally, data on materials and weaving methods was obtained through participant observation. Other supplementary data came from semi-structured interviews with men who help decorate the baskets, women who dye the grasses, grass merchants, and home-based basket brokers. Furthermore, each step of the basketry process, occurring within the walled city, was photographically recorded. Audio and video recordings were also used. Except in the case of participant observation, all interviews were conducted with a translator.

MATERIALS

The materials used in the construction of traditional Harari basketry include dried grasses and straws termed *qarma*, *migir*, and *agargara* in the Harari language. *Qarma* (*Hordeum vulgare*) is a broad common straw. Usually dyed, *qarma* is only used on the decorative surface of the basket.

A *Glossary of Ethiopian Plant Names* (Wolde, 1987) notes that the word “*migira*”, in the Harari language, refers to *Pennisetum schimperi*, which is common in the Ethiopian highlands at elevations of 1600-3100 meters. *Migir* are long, sturdy, un-dyed stems, and are used as the foundation or inner structure of each coil of the basket. *Migir* stems are readily available in the vicinity of Harar.⁽²⁾ *Agargara* is a variant of “*agar*”, the Harari word for *Eleusine jaegeri* (the Amhara equivalent is *akirma*, the common name of which is Manyatta grass). This grass is commonly used in Ethiopian basket making (Westphal, 1975). *Agargara* is used like thread in that it is sewn between and around the coils to hold them together. Often dyed, *agargara* stems have decorative as well as structural importance. After the stems are gathered in Jijiga and Addis Ababa in late August or early September, the *agargara* stems are brought to the city of Harar by the truckload. *Qarma*, *migir*, and *agargara* are all sold in the various markets and footpaths of the city. However, it may be said that the task of collecting and selling of grasses rests mainly outside the domain of women of the Harari ethnic group.

COLORING/STITCHING PROCESS

During her research in the 1970s, Hecht (1992) was able to obtain the formulas that Harari used to use in preparing three of the known traditional colors made from organic dyestuff. Yet even thirty years ago, the Harari were using pre-manufactured chemical dyes to make all of the contemporary colors. In six months of fieldwork, no weaver could be found who was aware of the organic dyestuff formulas; it seems as though this knowledge is completely lost to the community.

The coloring process of today, with the use of concentrated chemical dyes, appears to be quite simple, if not time consuming. In most cases, the powdered dyes are simply put in a pot, mixed with water and occasionally with lemon or kerosene to add shine. The ingredients are brought to a boil and the grasses are soaked until the desired color is achieved (see Fig. 1). Moreover, within the walled city, there may be as few as five households that color and sell large quantities of grasses dyed in the colors preferred by weavers of *ge mot*. About half of the basket makers interviewed did have some experience dyeing the grasses, even if only once, yet most chose to buy the material from the few professional dyers.

Harari basketry uses an oversewn coiling technique in which the weaver works in clockwise fashion with the decorative side of the basket towards her.



Fig. 1 Dyeint the gresses

Examples of the stitching technique may be found in Fig. 2. After the initial flat disk is created (see Fig. 2-c), the weaver may begin making a design by inserting split pieces of *qarma* underneath the edge of a stitch before the *agargara* stem is pulled tight. Henceforth, any alteration of colored *qarma* or *agargara* stems will result in a decoratively patterned basket.

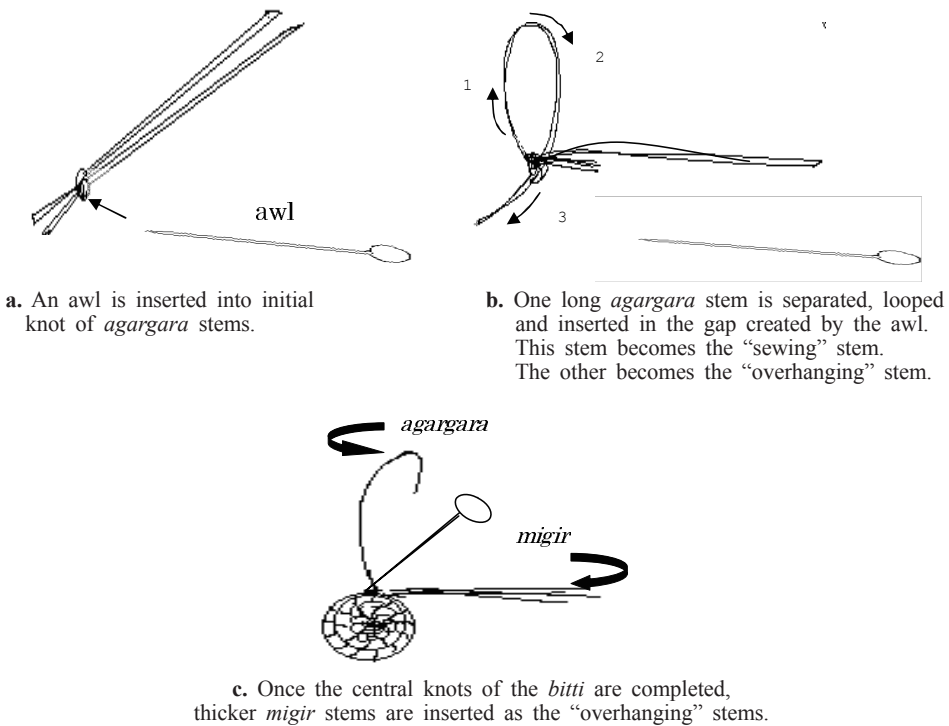


Fig. 2 Examples of stitching technique

CATEGORIZATION OF BASKETS

Thirty types of traditional *ge mot* have been recorded. These may generally be categorized into two groups: those that are primarily utilitarian baskets of frequent use, and those whose function is primarily decorative/ceremonial.

There are eight styles of utilitarian baskets. These tend to be composed of natural colored grasses. The decorative ornamentation on these baskets is limited to leather, vinyl and cowrie shells. The *afuftu* basket (used to winnow grains) is an example of this style (see Fig. 3). Of the eight known types of traditional utilitarian *ge mot*, *bessir mot* (used to carry meat), *darma darat* (a medium-sized bread plate) and *shalda gar* (used to store razors) are all in disuse. Thirty years ago, *eraz mudai* (a basket for storing clothes) was available (Hecht, 1992), but now it is no longer made.

Twenty-two styles of primarily decorative/ceremonial baskets have been recorded. The decorative ornamentation on these baskets tends to include complex stitched geometric patterns of colored grasses, leather, vinyl, and cowrie shells. The dowry baskets required of Harari brides are among this group. Examples include: *hamat mot* (a present from a bride to her mother-in-law, which may be used to cover food at ceremonies); and *bisha mudai* (used to send chewing gum to the house of a wedding ceremony), (see Fig. 4; Fig. 5). Of the twenty-two known types of primarily decorative/ceremonial styles,

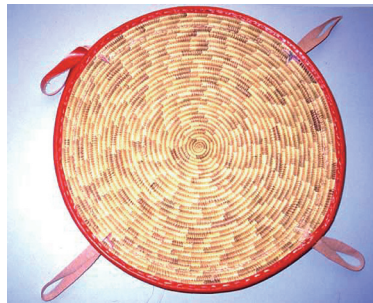


Fig. 3 *afuftu* basket



Fig. 4 *hamat mot*



Fig. 5 *bisha mudai*

duldula mot (used as a lid to cover food gifts), *maqamat* (a vase shaped vessel), *bitti mot* (miniature shallow plates), and *qotbay qot* (a small, tiered basket) are all in disuse. While *aw mot* (phallus-shaped basketry presented to male relatives), and *sini wa berelle* (lidded basket which holds a small saucer) are no longer made. It therefore seems that one-third of traditional *ge mot* baskets are either rarely made or exist only in a few antique examples.

DOWRY BASKETS

While a decline in the production of ten basket styles has been noted, it seems that the variety of baskets required for a minimal dowry set has actually increased by one style. The price of the minimal⁽³⁾ dowry set has increased

Table 1. Minimal Dowry Basket Set

Basket	Quantity 1985	Quantity/ Price per outfit 2003
Bisha Mudai	2	2/300
Etan Mudai	2	2/300
Sahana Sagari	4	6/1800
Aflala Uffa	4	2/600
Fijan Gar	4	2/1000
Gufta Mudai	0	1/1000
Total	16	15
Estimated cost	1,300-1,500 ETB	5000 ETB

Source of 1985 statistics: Hecht (1992)

During my research period, USD1= 8.6 Ethiopian Birr (ETB).

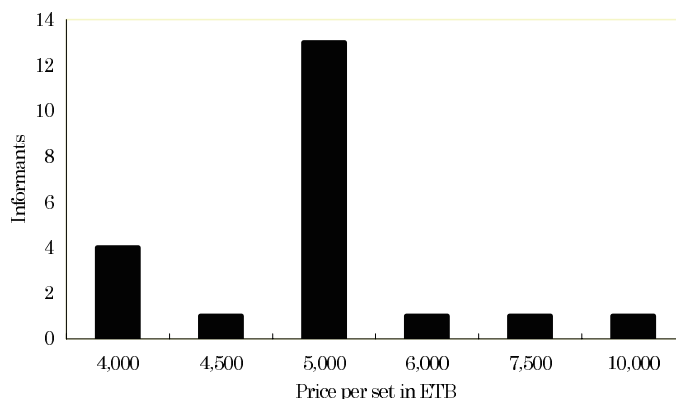


Fig. 6. Estimated Cost of Dowry Set (n=21)

more than threefold in eighteen years and the cost of materials to make such a set has gone from 200 birr to 500 birr. Table 1 of the "Minimal Dowry Basket Set" in 1985 vs. 2003 discloses some notable indicators of the current state of *ge mot*: 1) prices for dowry baskets have increased as the number of persons with the skills to weave these complex baskets has declined, and 2) while some basket styles may decline, those required for dowry sets have stayed significant in number. Hecht (1992) estimated that the sixteen baskets required for a minimal dowry set in 1985 would cost 1,300-1,500 ETB. Based on several interviews with groups of weavers, an estimate of the cost of a minimal set in 2003 was found to be 5,000 ETB.

Twenty one women were questioned about the cost of an average dowry basket set. The estimated cost of a minimal dowry set shows that 18 women (86%) said that the average set would cost between 4,000 and 5,000 ETB. This range is not exaggerated since it approximates the estimate of 5,000 ETB from Table 1. It may be that between 4,000 and 5,000 ETB is a widely known and reasonable estimate for dowry baskets among Harari women.

MARKETING

Both utilitarian baskets and decorative/ceremonial baskets are for sale in the walled city. Once a Harari girl or woman completes a basket, which she intends to sell, she has a number of options when trying to sell her basket. First, the weaver may sell her basket directly from her house to a customer. Secondly, she may decide to sell it to a professional weaver (or guild of weavers) who will mark up the price and resell the basket from a shop. Or, the individual

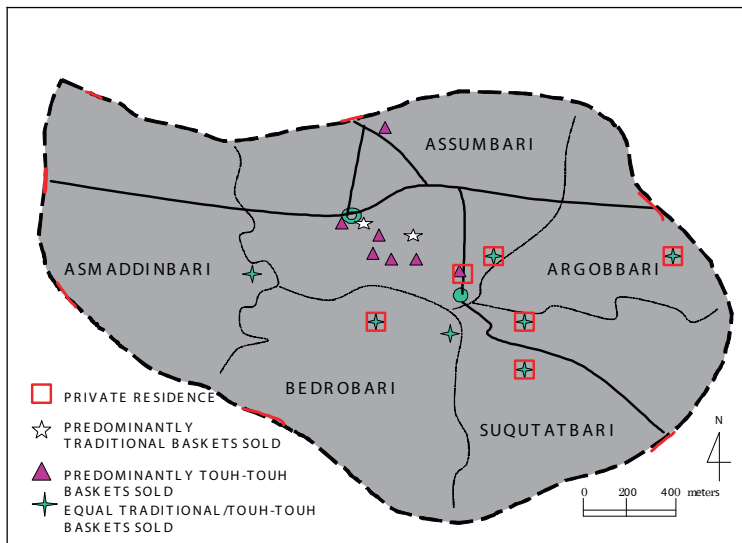


Fig. 7. Marketing of Basketry

weaver may choose to sell her basket to a basket broker who sells large quantities of baskets from her home.

Fig. 7 identifies shops and homes that sell substantial quantities of baskets. Many places sold a fairly equal mixture of tourist and traditional *ge mot* baskets. Many shops sell predominantly tourist types, while only two shops sell predominantly traditional *ge mot* baskets. Individual income earnings from basketry sales by informants were also noted. Among informants who sold at least one basket the previous year (who reported their earnings), the range of the previous year's estimated income from basket sales was between 600 ETB⁽⁴⁾ (\$70) and 3,100 ETB (\$363). According to the World Factbook (CIA, 2001), the 2001 estimated per capita GDP for Ethiopia was only \$700. It therefore becomes apparent that these basketry earnings may constitute significant contributions to Harari women's financial security.

CHANGES IN BASKETRY

Innovations in Harari basketry are numerous. A new type of basket, popular with tourists and Harari alike, fits in the category of "*touh-touh*" style. *Touh-touh* baskets resemble traditional *ge mot* in shape and often size but the quality of the coiling technique is inferior. The new popular styles are made of monochrome grasses and are ornamented with silver beadwork (see Fig. 8). Another notable change in style is the sewing of brightly colored acrylic yarn over coils of *migir*, as a replacement for *agargara* and *qarma* stems.

Among Harari weavers, both *touh-touh* and acrylic fiber baskets are technically considered *ge mot*. That is, they are baskets of the Harari ethnic group that have a place in the recent material culture of the group. *Touh-touh* styles do have a status much inferior to the traditional *ge mot*, but because they are inexpensive, most Harari homes are presently decorated with many more *touh-touh* styles than traditional *ge mot*. Acrylic fiber baskets, however, maintain a high status because they are decorated with traditional geometric *ge mot* patterns.

Harari women also weave several new shapes and patterns. These include the "Africa" plate (see Fig. 9). Moreover, the historical significance of older pat-



Fig. 8 One of the new popular styles



Fig. 9 "Africa" plate

terns and their names is no longer commonly known. For many younger Harari weavers, the meaning behind the names of some patterns has been lost to history. Still, a few older women are well versed in the links between basketry pattern names and historical people and places. Previously, the knowledge of these links was passed by means of oral traditions in the setting of *mooy gar* (alternating house for basketry work among groups of girlfriends). However, with the disappearance of the tradition of gathering at the *mooy gar*, today's younger weavers are likely to have only a vague association with the history behind the patterns unless the name has an obvious linguistic correlate. It may be significant that the loss of details about basketry nomenclature hints at the greater loss of common knowledge of historical details. Indeed, Camilla Gibb (1997: 383) pointed out that "by making interpretations of history a part of daily life, incorporating them into aspects of dress and architecture and ultimately 'tradition' and culture, *Ge usu* [Harari] are reminded every day of their shared history in these particular terms" .

The functions of some of the traditional baskets have also changed. For example, *aflala uffu* basket lids customarily covered the black clay *aflala* jars used to store valuables (Hecht, 1992). Nowadays this basket is often filled with artificial flowers and hung upside-down on the central wall of the living room. Furthermore, some *ge mot* have fallen into extreme disuse with the availability of durable manufactured alternatives. For example, *shalda gar*, traditionally used to store shaving supplies has been replaced by plastic alternatives. Also, enamelware bowls, or teacups are often hung on the walls in the places previously reserved for baskets. Finally, it is a major innovation that men are contributing to the crafting of Harari baskets. Informants suggested that it is only within the last 10-15 years that young boys have been employed by women weavers to ornament their *touh-touh* style baskets with beads.

WOMEN'S CRAFT GUILDS

In recent years, some Harari women noticed the sharp decline in the production of traditional *ge mot* and have joined forces to maintain the tradition. In the walled city of Harar, there now exist three official associations of women weavers. Members of these associations say that they shared common goals at the time of their official formation in the mid to late 1990s when basketry production in the city was really waning. The women wanted to preserve their culture by continuing their prized craft tradition in a group setting which is the traditional setting for weaving baskets. They also wanted a way for the guild members to earn extra income by combining resources and having a forum to market their baskets. Common features of the associations are: written rules; officers such as secretary, cashier, disciplinarian, are chosen once a year or once every two years; members are required to work between 2-6 scheduled shifts a week in the shop; and any profits of the association are distributed to the members once or twice a year (although the weavers do receive periodic income

when their own baskets are sold in the shop). There are also differences among the associations, which are highlighted below.

Enayasia may be the most successful of the associations. The twenty-member association was founded in 1998 at the suggestion of a Catholic NGO and the Regional Bureau of Culture. The members of this association are not required to pay membership fees. Their shop is centrally located in the annex of the famous Arthur Rimbaud house and includes a large room used for the storage of the grasses, which are provided to members by the association. There is also a large workspace for the members to weave their baskets. *Enayasia* received assistance, in the form of a 200,000 ETB loan at the time of its formation, which has not been repaid. The guild also received the donation of rent-free accommodation in the Rimbaud House from the regional government. The marketing success of *Enayasia* allows for the resources needed for the guild to purchase baskets from weavers in the community for resale at its shop. Furthermore, guild members specialize in the crafting of high quality, intricate, traditional *ge mot* styles.

The twenty-three-member *Aye Abida* association began gathering at the home of one of the members in 1997, then officially formed and acquired a shop in 1999. At the time of their formation, members paid a fee of 100 ETB. However, subsequent monthly dues have not been required. The association received some assistance in the form of an 11,000 ETB loan, which has been repaid. *Aye Abida* is housed in an extremely small shop in the center of the city. The association does not provide its members with the grasses to make their baskets, but keeps resources in order to buy baskets from weavers in the community for resale at its shop. The baskets that are sold at the *Aye Abida* shop tend to be *touh-touh* style, or simpler patterns of traditional *ge mot* styles.

The third women's craft guild is a forty-five-member weavers group, which is a part of the Harari National Women's Association (HNWA). This weaving association was established in 1995. The members of the HNWA weaving guild are only required to pay 1 ETB a month as a membership fee. The large shop of this association is centrally located in a rent-free building that has been donated by the regional government. The financial situation of this association does not allow for the provision of basketry materials to the members, neither is the association able to buy baskets from the general community for resale at the shop. The weavers of HNWA mainly consist of impoverished women for whom basketry sales contribute a large share of their household income. In many cases, the women were taught the skill of basketry through programs offered by HNWA and they are not necessarily proficient in the refined traditional Harari basket styles. Consequently, the basketry styles sold at the HNWA shop are mainly Oromo and Somali types.

Ultimately, the weaver's associations of *Enayasia*, *Aye Abida* and HNWA are potential role models, which can encourage the interest of younger women in basketry especially in three ways. First, there is increased visibility of basketry within the town. The shops are all centrally located within the *Jugol* wall and Harari women can now be seen weaving baskets in the shop windows of the

main streets of town where in the past this activity was confined within the walls of individual compounds. Secondly, the purchase of baskets from community members promotes the skill of basket making for income generation. As previously mentioned, two of the associations are able to buy baskets directly from the general community. Especially during school vacations and around the wedding season, young girls who are proficient basket weavers are therefore assured a small source of income. Thirdly, these associations may be seen as innovative examples of the entrepreneurial potential for Harari women. Indeed, the success of these associations has the potential to encourage young women to seek career options in basketry. In effect, production of *ge mot* may be seen, not only as a skill which may grant one occasional income, but may be a potentially profitable business venture, even for educated women who want to work outside of the home.

Despite the achievements of these three associations, it is unfortunate that there are virtually no members under the age of 30, and that, furthermore, membership into these associations is closed. It is discouraging that there are no current, formal efforts by regional administrators, or other voluntary women's associations to officially establish a group of weavers among the younger generation of girls; nor to incorporate younger women into the already established guilds. Nonetheless, the potential for entrepreneurial success of the Harari women's craft guilds has been recognized. The families of the women support their business endeavors, and the community patronizes the guilds. Furthermore, as Margaret Snyder (2000: 15) observed, "women's micro and small businesses augment GDP while they enhance individual and family well being-the means and goal of development".

CONCLUSION

It seems that Harari basketry has undergone several changes in recent decades. Some types of traditional baskets have been replaced by manufactured alternatives from plastic to enamel bowls. The new, quickly produced and brightly colored *touh-touh* styles are also gaining in popularity in the community. These are often placed on the wall-spaces previously reserved for *ge mot*. Harari weavers are also relying on limited numbers of people to provide them with materials such as dyed grasses. And for the first time, men are contributing to the production of some Harari baskets by ornamenting them with beads.

As of today, it appears that one-third of the traditional styles have gone through a decline in production. Importantly, some Harari women are noticing the decline in traditional styles and, through weaving guilds, are making efforts to preserve the tradition. For the last five to six years, efforts have been made by these women to continue weaving the traditional styles. Although this study has presented a number of "informal" ways that Harari weaver's guilds are influencing the generation of younger Harari girls, understanding in detail the extent of their influence will require further study.

NOTES

- (1) Bianchini *et al.* (2002).
- (2) *Migir* stems are not only used for basketry, they are also used to make the common sweeping brooms found in the city. However, Harari basket weavers prefer the longer, thicker brooms of *migir*.
- (3) “Minimal” refers to the average, expected, or usual dowry basket set. The inclusion of any other baskets, in addition to these, would be considered an exceptional set. The absence of any of these baskets would be considered an inferior or insufficient set.
- (4) As of November 2003, 100 ETB = 11.70 \$

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Author's Name and Address: Belle ASANTE, Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto, 606-8501, JAPAN.
 E-mail: asante@jambo.africa.kyoto-u.ac.jp